Error processing SSI file

Dr. Michael Galaty in Northern Albania

January 1, 2008
Jackson, MS

It is New Year's Day and I am preparing to leave for the remote high mountains of northern Albania. I've been to the mountains many times, of course, but always in the summer, never before in the dead of winter. Two years ago when Wayne Lee, chief historian for the Shala Valley Project, and I conceived of the trip, it was a pipe dream only, a crazy, half-baked idea hatched in a bar, late one night. But here we are in 2008, about to embark. Tonight I'll pack my equipment (much of it supplied by Buffalo Peak Outfitters, here in Jackson), all of it designed for cold-weather trekking and camping, including a brand new pair of snowshoes. In a typical winter the Northern Albanian mountains get upwards of 15 feet of snow and villagers are completely cut off.

Michael Galaty, left, with SVP co-director Ols Lafe. Photo by Robert Schon, June, 2006.

The only easy way in and out of the valley is by helicopter, but those come only if there is a medical emergency. So the plan is to go by foot over the pass at 6000+ feet above sea level and into Shala to stay with a traditional family in the village of Theth. The forecast for the coastal city of Shkodër is a balmy 40°F, but I know it will be much colder in the mountains, and I can't help but wonder if my years in Mississippi have irreparably ruined my tolerance for real winter weather…

The Shala Valley Project (SVP) is a multi-year scientific research program designed to study the lives and history of the people of the Shala Valley, who are members of the Shala tribe (Albanian *fis*). Our team is an interdisciplinary one composed of archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians. In the course of several summer field seasons we have developed a detailed understanding of how our friends in Shala, who are shepherds and farmers, survive, but we know nothing about the long winter months. There is some urgency to this winter trip to Shala, too. In 1991 when Communism ended in Albania over 200 families lived year-round in the village of Theth. Today fewer than 15 stay through the winter. Soon there may be none at all and a way of life will be lost to anthropology forever. We've lots of questions: What do people *do* all winter long? How do they keep warm, and light their homes, and cook their meals? How do they keep their animals alive? Is life in Theth in winter one of hardship, sickness, and hunger? Or might the opposite be true? Might life in Theth in winter be one of rest, health, and bounty? The only way to know for sure is to go and see.

Carleton Coon, seated at right, and his team take a break in the snow of northern Albania in 1929. From S. Frasheri, *Through Mirdite in Winter* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2002).

The last (and only) anthropologist to visit the Albanian mountains in winter was Harvard's Carleton Coon in 1929. Coon went to measure heads (all the rage in early 20th-century anthropology) and so he has little or nothing to say about life there in the winter. Coon was accompanied, however, by a well-educated, city-born Albanian named Stavre Frasheri, who wrote a book about his adventure called *Through Mirdite in Winter* (translated and published in English in 2002 by Peter Prifti). Stavre had never been to the Albanian mountains and when he told his friends and family in Tirana, Albania's capital, he was going, this was their response:

> "Do you know where you are going? You will die of cold there. You will be devoured by wolves and
>
> other beasts in those high mountains. You will be mired in six-foot-deep snow. Food is lacking and malaria is rampant." (Frasheri, p. XV)

As it turns out, Frasheri had a wonderful, even life-transforming, experience. There are indeed wolves in the Albanian mountains, even today, but he was not eaten by them. He was cold and there was a lot of snow, but he survived. He had plenty to eat and extols the impressive hospitality of his poor, yet gracious, mountain hosts. On page 33 of his book he describes his first view of the mountains:

> Mountains! Wherever you look you see mountains. Who can describe the feelings experienced here by the soul that has left behind the dust and noise of the city, and has come to this quiet place, where one hears only the tinkling of a bell worn by a prized ram, the sound of a distant flute, and the slow and steady echo of a limpid stream, who source is far, far away in the lofty mountains covered with

snow!

Frasheri's description is, to be sure, romanticized, but I suspect not far from the truth. If nothing else, I expect the mountains in winter to be beautiful. They certainly are in the summer. Absolutely gorgeous. And life in the mountains in the summer is good, too. But what about life in the mountains in winter?

Anthropologists have long recognized that cultural behavior varies strongly by season. The renowned French sociologist Marcel Mauss noted in his book on the Eskimo (*Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo*, published in 1904-05) that archaeologists digging summer versus winter Eskimo camps would swear they were dealing with two completely different cultures. Everything was different: the construction and organization of the house, the clothing, the tools used – everything. Might this be the case in Shala? Might life in one season produce a radically different material culture as compared to the other? A potential problem for our archaeological interpretations, if so. Paradoxically, anthropologists have found that winter is a time of plenty for Eskimos. A time to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family. A time for games and storytelling and singing. Might this be true of Theth, as well?

Of course another real possibility is that our friends in Shala spend the long, cold winter holed up in their houses watching satellite television. But televisions need electricity and we are unsure if Theth's small hydroelectric plant functions in the winter. In a recent *New York Times* editorial titled The Big Sleep, author Graham Robb argues that prior to the 20th century European peasants spent the entire winter, literally, sleeping. Maybe that is what we will find in Shala: masses of snoring, sleeping villagers, tucked away warm in their beds, awaiting the coming of spring.

January 7, 2008
Tirana, Albania

I arrived in Albania yesterday, January 6th, having flown from Chicago via Milan to Tirana, the capital. As we flew over north Albania, I tried to see if there was snow on the mountains, but they were covered in dark clouds, as though somone had dropped a wet grey blanket over the top of them. As we got off the plane, it started to pour rain. People pushed their way onto the bus that would take us to the terminal and I watched the baggage handlers unload my backpack, which sat on the tarmac, soaked in rainwater. Not an auspicious start to our journey ...

My friend and colleague Ols Lafe met me at the arrival gate. We found a seat at the airport cafe and ordered coffee. Ols pointed to the television. The local news channel was airing a Weather Channel-style report from the mountains. A bedraggled reporter shouted into his microphone, camera rolling, as wind whipped snow around his head. Heavy rain in Tirana meant snow in the mountains. Lots. Northern villages were already cut off as the roads and passess became choked with snow. Several trucks had slid off the northern highway. We'd be snow shoeing into Shala via the winter pass after all, it seemed.

After an hour or so, Wayne Lee arrived, having flown in from North Carolina via Gatwick. Unfortunately his bag of equipment didn't make it and would arrive tomorrow, January 7th, by 7 p.m. We couldn't head to Shkodra and into the mountains without Wayne's bag, so this meant a day in Tirana, a day we had planned to spend in Shkodra re-packing our equipment and mapping our route through the mountains. Again, not an auspicious start.
But if I've learned anything in my many years of working in Albania running archaeological projects, it is that it pays to be flexible and adaptable, like Albanians themselves. To some degree it is difficult to make hard and fast plans much in advance since they are invariably knocked off track by unexpected events - a power outage, a flat tire, an earthquake - all of which happen in Albania frequently, but unpredictably. So, we called our contacts in Shkodra and warned them that we would arrive much later than we had expected. We'd pick up the bag at the airport and head north by taxi from there.

We piled into Ols' car and drove into the capital. Since it was a Sunday, the traffic was remarkably light and we made good time. Our friends Steve and Lea Cristina had offered to put us up for the night, so Ols made his way through the city towards the US Embassy's heavily-guarded domestic compund. Steve is head of consular affairs at the Embassy, and he and Lea visited us in Theth last summer.

We pulled the car up to a large metal door which swung slowly open. A soldier stood in the doorway holding a shotgun as his companion swept the underside of the car with a mirror, looking for bombs. The search ended and, smiling now, they waved us forward into a neighborhood that looked like it had been plucked out of suburban Jackson, barbeque grills at the ready, SUVs in the driveway, and basketball hoops over garage doors. A rather disconcerting sight! Steve and Lea welcomed us into their home and we took our bags to the guest room.

At 6 p.m., after a short but much-needed nap, we were joined by members of the Embassy staff interested in

archaeology and history, some of whom had themselves done quite a bit of trekking in Albania. We chatted for a while and then took our seats at a large dining room table. Steve, who is from New Orleans, had made jambalaya, complete with real andouille sausage! The food and conversation were excellent, and best of all the Cristina's are raki connossieurs, so after dinner we had multiple rounds of the stiff Albanian brandy, all of which is distilled at home like American moonshine. They had kinds from the north and south, made from grapes, plums, and blackberries. Needless to say Wayne and I slept well last night.

The day dawned bright and sunny. The rain had moved off and the temperature rose as Lea took us into Tirana. Warm weather after snow is not necessarily a bad thing, since it will make the snow shoeing easier. Tirana bustled as we loaded our bags into Ols' car. We'll have some lunch, see some sights, and then head to the airport to collect Wayne's bag. Hopefully nothing else will happen to disturb our carefully laid plans ... Next stop, Shkodra and the mountains!

January 7-8, 2008
Shokodra, Albania

Having collected Wayne's bag at the airport, we hopped a cab to Shkodra. The rain had stopped and the temperature dropped. The car sliced through patches of dense fog as it sped north. A friend, Mario Delia, picked us up in downtown Shkodra. Mario had agreed to put us up for the night and drive us into the mountains on the 8th. After a quick dinner and a shot of raki, we retired to our room to repack our equipment.

I slept little that night. We still did not know what the weather was really like up at the pass, and so I was anxious about the climb. Different people had said different things, but all agreed there was snow. I peeked out the window and saw stars. The sky had cleared. Dogs barked in the distance and a confused rooster crowed. The next thing I knew the alarm clock was ringing: 5 a.m.

We loaded our backpacks into Mario's 4x4 and swung through Shkodra to pick up Zamir Tafilica. Zamir is director of the Shkodër Historical Museum and, along with Ols Lafe, the other co-director of the Shala Valley Project. As a young man he had taught school in Theth, having been posted there by the Communist authorities. He hadn't been to the mountains in winter in decades and was excited to go again. Zamir had suggested we hire a *malesorë* (literally, "mountain man") to guide us, so we picked up Mehil Çarku in Koplik. I had met Mehil several times before and knew that until recently he and his family had spent winters in Theth. But like so many others he had given up. True to form, he showed up in rubber boots, jeans tied shut with wire, no gloves, and a baseball cap, carrying an umbrella. At least he wore a heavy parka. He must have thought we looked ridiculous in our gaiters and gortex. Mehil said there would be no need for the winter pass. We would use the Qafe Thores, the summer pass (c. 6000 masl), which was not yet at great risk for avalanche.

We headed north into the mountains along a road I had driven many times before, but always in the summer. As we gained in elevation heading towards the small town of Dedaj, snow appeared on the peaks and my cell phone signal faded. Apparently Theth's cell tower had gone dead two weeks earlier. No one knew why or when service might be restored. We pulled into Boga, the last village before Theth, and filled our water bottles at the village spring. Mario's 4x4 managed to make it another mile or two into the mountains before the snow and ice became too deep. We geared up and said goodbye. He would meet us at this same spot in two days' time.

We started out walking. There was maybe a foot of snow. The air was crisp but not overly cold and light clouds shielded us from the sun. The path we took followed a dry creek bed straight up. Mehil would, it seemed, avoid the road and its interminable switchbacks. After about an hour of steady hiking, the snow grew deeper and we switched to snow shoes. The going became difficult for Mehil: Lacking snow shoes, he sunk up to his waist with every step. Finally we rejoined the road and could now see the large iron cross marking the pass into Shala, a Catholic enclave in the largely Muslim country.

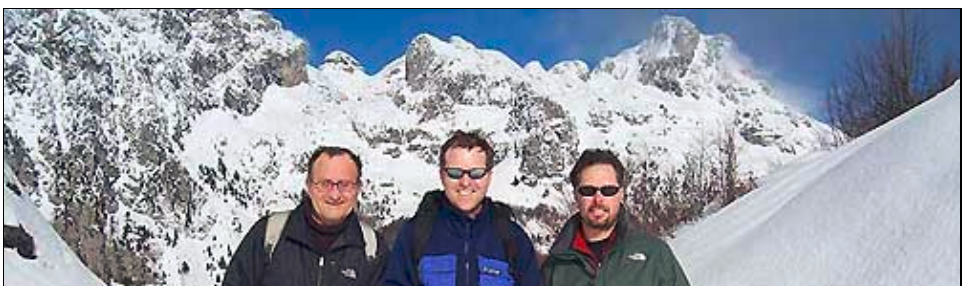
Wayne and Mehil reached the pass first, with me close behind and Zamir bringing up the rear. They pointed at the snow and I saw tracks. A lone wolf had been running ahead of us. I looked out over the edge and into Shala. Mountains! And snow. Clouds. Occasional shafts of sunlight. I had thought that Shala was amongst the most beautiful places on Earth. Having seen the valley in winter, I now am convinced that this is true.

Wayne Lee and Mehil Çarku at the Qafe Thores.

Wolf tracks.

The peaks of Shala in winter.

The time was about noon and we still had a long ways to go, so we took a celebratory photo and started out again. It would be downhill from here, along paths I did not know existed. Weaving through pine trees, along ravines that rushed with water in summer, we made our way down into Shala. By about 3000 feet the snow grew shallow and wet, and we removed our snow shoes. Mehil pointed out bear tracks. We could see village houses in the distance. Smoke curled from one or two, testifying to a human presence.



Zamir Tafilica, Wayne Lee, and Michael Galaty (l to r) at the pass into Shala.

As we entered Mehil's neighborhood, Gjeçaj, he began to "telephone," a practice described by all early travelers to northern Albania. Putting his hands to his head he shouted into the peaks, his voice booming and echoing: "I am here! I have returned!" Voices replied: "Welcome home! God bless!" An old man tending his sheep ran to greet us: "Honor to you, and blessings. Are you tired? Have you come far? Stop for five minutes by the fire. Have coffee." We gladly accepted his offer.

We took off our packs and boots and crowded into a small living room. A fire roared in the fireplace. Several men and an old woman made room for us by the hearth. They grabbed our feet in their hands, checking to make sure our socks weren't wet. We had coffee and raki. Five minutes in Shala is never five minutes, and after twenty or more, we felt warm and refreshed. Wayne's face glowed and Zamir brought news from Shkodra. Several of the men knew us from the summer and they were happy to see us again. Visitors are a gift from God, for they bring diversion and excitement to what is otherwise a rather monotonous time of year.

After an hour or so, we said our goodbyes and made for the village center. We had planned to stay with a friend, Gjovalinë Lokthi, and his family. Gjovalinë had just been appointed *kryeplak* (village "head man"), so we would have something to celebrate. The sun dipped behind the mountains as we passed by the village church and up towards the Lokthi house. I knocked on the outer gate. Gjovalinë's wife's head popped out the door. "I've come to see the kryeplak," I said. With a look of astonishment, she yelled for her husband. Gjovalinë came to the door, sleep in his eyes. He, too, was astonished to see two Americans and a Shkodrani standing at the threshold. We exchanged greetings in the traditional way, by laying the temples of our heads alongside one another. "Can we spend a couple of nights?" I asked. "Of course," said Gjovalinë, smiling. "Of course."

The house was abuzz. Kids scurried underfoot. Grandma and grandpa chattered. Our boots were pulled off our feet and we were pushed into chairs alongside the fireplace. Logs were tossed in and soon the fire roared (so much so that we started a chimney fire, scaring grandma half to death!). The women of the house made coffee and poured raki. And then a feast of epic proportions was laid on the table: fatback bacon, wild goat, lamb (all salted and preserved by smoking over the fireplace), pickled tomatoes, fried potatoes, cheese, corn and wheat bread. We ate and ate and ate, and still they told us to eat more. It was a wonderful reunion and a wonderful night. We had made it to Shala. We were among friends. I wondered what tomorrow might bring ...

Our host Govalinë Lokthi (at left, with beard) and our feast (photo by W. Lee).

January 9, 2008

Theth, Shala, Albania

The family had elected to sleep upstairs so that we could have the beds in the living room, near the fire. We awoke to a knock at the door. It was still dark outside. Gjovalinë's wife, Mariana, stepped into the room. She went immediately to the fireplace and, using a pine bough, swept last night's ash onto a sheet of metal and deposited it outside. Then, using kindling and the bough as a fan, she coaxed the fire back to life. As it grew in strength she fed it larger logs. The room immediately began to warm.

Mariana Lokthi and daughters.

As is the case during the summer months, the wife is in charge of the household. She does all the cooking and cleaning. This is true as well of the winter. An additional winter task of hers is to haul firewood and tend the fire. She also makes innumerable cups of coffee, mostly for the men of the house, and serves raki. That is how we started our day: coffee and raki.

Gjovalinë joined us and we decided to hike to the neighborhood of Grunas, to the south, to visit the prehistoric archaeological site we had discovered there in 2005. This proved to be a fortuitous decision, since the site was completely free of vegetation, and for the first time we could trace its massive, megalithic fortification walls in full. We spent nearly three hours exploring the site and Gjovalinë was a great help since he was able to identify for us landscape features that were to his eye modern, such as a trench dug by the army during Communist times.

Michael Galaty, Grunas prehistoric site in background.

After Grunas, we hiked north towards the Ulaj neighborhood along an irrigation canal. The sun had just crested the eastern peaks, and the snow-covered mountains glowed bright white, almost impossible to look at. As we approached the houses, Gjovalinë grabbed my arm and stopped me. He pointed at a pile of leaves and said something in Albanian that I did not understand. I saw a heavy chain snaking out from beneath the leaves, and I reached for it. Gjovalinë shouted and grabbed my arm again. He picked up a rock and dropped it into the leaves—BANG! SNAP! Massive, spiked iron jaws leapt from the ground, flinging leaves in all directions. It was a wolf trap. Gjovalinë smiled as if to say, "Good thing you didn't touch it, huh?" and said, "Martin Pisha."

I knew Martin, having met him several times in the past. He was 80+ years old and still lived the traditional way. He spent his winters as a trapper—of wolves, martin, badgers, and foxes—and a hunter, primarily of wild goats. "Is he here?" I asked. "Yes," replied Gjovalinë. "Let's go see him for a coffee."

Gjovalinë reset the trap, and we hiked the short distance up to Martin's home. He was genuinely surprised and happy to see us, and ushered us into his living room, where his wife was busy stoking the fire. From the ceiling hung furs, some of them stretched on racks and drying. There was at least one wolf and several goat skins. I felt torn. I truly felt sad for the loss of these beautiful, endangered creatures, but as an anthropologist I also knew that Martin had trapped and hunted his whole life, as had his father and his father before him. This was a part of the culture and a way of life, one I was reluctant to see end. In some ways I was happy to find that at least a few men still trapped and hunted for a living.

Martin Pisha with drying furs.

We finished our coffee and raki and said goodbye to Martin, who promised to swing by Gjovalinë's house later in the evening. After lunch and much-needed naps, we woke again to coffee and more raki. It was time to eat dinner, and it looked like another feast was taking shape. Tonight would be different, though. Whereas the night before the family had maintained the traditional spatial division of sexes (women in the kitchen, men in the living room), tonight the whole family was present—if not sitting at the table and eating, at least in the room—enjoying conversation. In part, this was because one of Gjovalinë's daughters was not feeling well and she wanted her daddy. But also I sensed that on any given day, the family spent much of their time in the living room, in front of the hearth, sharing company. There is an intimacy in this kind of frontier lifestyle that we have lost in modern America. We ate slowly, told stories, played with the kids, laughed a lot. This seems to be the winter pattern of social relations, which mimics the summer pattern but on an enlarged scale.

But intimacy may become stifling, too. Most of the individuals who spent the winter bemoaned the loss of the old days,

when many families spent the winter. Back then, you always had someone to visit or someone was visiting you. In recent years, the circle of community in Theth in the winter has grown small, and this adds to the sense of isolation and monotony that sets in during the long winter months. Many men, like Mehil, had given up on the winter not so much because of the hardships that invariably accompanied winter, but because without human critical mass, winter had become horribly boring. To some degree, the television had replaced visiting guests as a source of entertainment, but could not in any real, meaningful way compensate for this loss.

As the sun set, we finished dinner and settled by the fire. Kids crawled into adult laps. Martin Pisha came by and we toasted his "long life". Tomorrow we would leave. Morning would come soon enough…

Sunset reflected on the eastern peaks of Shala.

January 10, 2008
Theth-Shkodra-Tirana

Around 4 in the morning I slipped out of bed to go to the bathroom. The Lokthi house compound was equipped with an outhouse and pit toilet, so I scurried across the yard, being careful not to wake sleeping dogs (especially the vicious guard dog kept in a box in the corner). As I went to reenter the house I glanced skyward, and gasped. The stars shone brilliantly. The Milky Way arched overhead, and Orion stood atop the western peaks, sword drawn, defending the pass. The night sky in Theth in summer is impressive. In winter, unbelievable.

One hour later, we were up re-packing our equipment, sipping hot Turkish coffee. I declined a shot of raki, as did my companions, which Gjovalinë thought was quite silly, given the cold outside. We said our goodbyes as the family saw us out the front door. Gjovalinë had business in Shkodra and Tirana and so would accompany us. It was still dark, so we turned on our headlamps to light the rocky path back to Mehil's house.

An hour later, as the sky grew light, we approached the Gjeçaj neighborhood on the other side of the valley. We passed by the hotel where we stay during the summer field season, and much to our surprise, a light was on. Gjon Frashnishta, the 70-year-old father of the hotel owner, was there, having walked in the day before with a companion to check that the building was tight for the winter. He was absolutely stunned when we walked up, and gave us each a big bear hug. They would, he said, walk out with us. So, now we were seven, headed for the pass.

Our team of seven, on the way to the pass. Gjon Frashnishta to far left.

Conditions for hiking were perfect. The temperature had dropped during the night, and the top six inches of the six feet or more of snow had frozen. No need for snow shoes—we could walk right on top of the drifts. Gjon, the eldest among us and therefore *kapedan* (our 'captain'), led the way. For a septuagenarian, he set a brisk pace! It was straight up all the way to the ridge top.

Midway we stopped at a spring to take a break. I had wondered why the men carried no water. Now I understood: They knew where the springs were, so why carry water when they could get it along the way? Mehil pulled a long string of dried, sugared figs from his coat pocket and we shared them.

Our break at the spring. Me with a string of dried figs. Photo by W. Lee.

A small bottle of raki was produced to stave off the cold. The men were in a good mood, though perhaps a little sad to be leaving the valley. I realized that hiking together like this was fun for them, a very social event they had probably participated in many, many times during their lives. They joked incessantly, and made much fun of us, with our fancy backpacks. They themselves carried nothing. As we turned to continue, I looked back into the valley. I could see the whole thing. It surrounded me like a huge, round amphitheatre. It was all I could do to keep from shouting.

We finally made it to the road and the temperature rose, but still we managed to walk on top of the snow. There were tremendous drifts up near the pass, and we had to be careful in crossing the remains of several small avalanches that had blocked the road. I could see now why the Qafe Thores would soon be closed and the winter pass necessary. We took another short break at the pass itself and then turned to head downhill (a relief!) into the valley of Shkrel. Suddenly, Gjovalinë plopped down on his back and began sledding at high speed down the mountain! One by one, with whoops of joy, the men followed suit. I saw Wayne speed off, and then Zamir, and then thought to myself, "What the heck, you only live once," and off I went. In a few seconds I covered a hundred feet in elevation and had reached the next switchback. Definitely an efficient means of transport.

We continued downhill, now walking along a dry creek bed. The snow grew wet, and water dripped from the trees all around us. Within an hour we had joined the road back to Boga, and the snow had disappeared. We arrived at the meeting point well before Mario's scheduled 1 p.m. arrival and so continued on our way. Another hour, and we had settled at a small café in Boga and were drinking coffee and beer. It was scarcely noon.

By about 1:30 Mario rolled up in his mud-splashed 4x4. He had been delayed in Shkodra but was happy to see we had returned safely from Shala. We climbed into his truck and made for Shkodra. By 3:00 we were there, and by 7:00 we were back in Tirana.

The central research question of the Shala Valley Project regards isolation: To what degree are the origin and continued existence of the northern Albanian tribes, including Shala, a response to isolation in the remote high valleys? In one long morning we had gone on foot from Theth to Boga, and by late afternoon we were in Shkodra. I am more firmly convinced now, having gone to Shala in winter, that the origin and survival of the tribes were not products of extreme isolation per se, but rather they formed and maintained their independence through an ability to isolate themselves when the need arose. Each *malesorë* knows the mountains like the back of his hand. He is master of his domain and would have been well able to protect it, when necessary, from the outside world. However, while isolation was an option, I believe it quite likely that even in Medieval times, mountain peoples desired—in the winter, craved—contact with the wider world. Even today, isolation is limiting and can be boring, and in some cases, dangerous. It is hard to know how often in the past Shala faced challenges and change from the outside, but surely today, change has come, and the challenges of surviving as a people, as a community, as tribes, in the northern mountains are greater than ever. If I live to see the last mountain family board up their house for the winter and move to the city, it shall be a sad, sad day.

Ulaj neighborhood, village of Theth, valley of Shala. Only two of these homes are occupied through the

winter.